

London's Remaining Men-Only Gentlemen's Clubs Discuss Admitting Women Members

By Amelia Gentleman, *The Guardian*, May 11, 2024

Discussions are under way over whether to admit women at several of London's remaining gentlemen's clubs after this week's vote by Garrick club members to allow women to join after 193 years. The Travellers Club, Boodle's, the East India Club and White's are among a handful of the remaining London clubs that still do not admit female members.

5 Club secretaries at some of these institutions are understood to have consulted lawyers to see whether their rules are also now vulnerable to reinterpretation in the wake of the Garrick vote, which rested on new legal advice that the pronoun "he" in the club's rulebook should also be taken to mean "she".

10 The question of whether women should be allowed to become members is also being discussed at the East India Club, which has a huge clubhouse in St James's Square, central London. The club's original members worked for the East India Company, which acted as an agent of British imperialism in India and was wound down in disgrace in 1873; the club's name evokes nostalgia for one of the most exploitative and controversial periods of the British empire. Sources said the club's management was understood to be in favour of changing the rules to allow women to join, but votes
15 on the issue had never reached the required two-thirds majority.

An informal poll at the Travellers Club, which has historically had a close association with the Foreign Office and international diplomats, rejected a proposal to allow women to join in 2014. Many members canvassed expressed strong hostility to the suggestion, with one stating that the men-only rules allowed members to enjoy "male banter, without having to bother with the etiquette
20 that one inevitably must adhere to in female company (whether it be offering her drinks, waiting for her to eat, or standing when she arrives or leaves)".

"I don't think they will all topple; I think that they'll keep their heads down, hoping that no one notices they're even still there and that the problem goes away," one club member said, asking for anonymity.

25 Those clubs that decide to change their rules to admit women may not alter much in atmosphere for some time, not least because existing members have to begin recruiting women with the spare time and money, and the desire to join. The Marylebone Cricket Club (MCC) started admitting female members in 1998, after 212 years of being a men-only organisation; 26 years later, women only make up 4% of the full members – because there is a 29-year waiting list and prior to 1998,
30 women would not have been able to put themselves on it. The club has a limited number of about 18,000 members, so someone has to leave or die before a new member can be admitted.

Jill Rutter, a senior fellow of the Institute for Government and former civil servant, and a cricket enthusiast, said: "It's one thing to admit women in principle but as we have seen with other clubs, the pace of change can be glacial unless they're prepared to take exceptional measures to accelerate
35 women in. More than 20 years after women were finally allowed to apply to the MCC they still represent a minute fraction of the membership. There, the issue is that women were put at the bottom of the waiting list. At the Garrick it will be how many are blackballed by women-sceptical members."